

Above and Beyond: Outcomes of a
Model School-Church-Community Collaboration

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Abstract

This interpretive case study focused upon the outcomes of a 13-year collaboration between a PreK-5 elementary school serving a high percentage of low-income students, and a church located in their urban neighborhood. The purpose of the investigation was to: (1) perform a qualitative study that identified central themes underlying this successful collaboration; (2) effectively integrate the themes into a coherent program theory that characterized the efforts by stakeholders to impact poverty; and (3) use emerging theory to develop a framework to be adapted by other organizations including, but not restricted to churches, to effectively address issues of poverty within their communities.

Results revealed key aspects of an emerging program theory based upon central themes of respect and spirituality. Collaborative leadership, renewed community, and poverty resources grew from those central themes to produce multiple program outcomes, including: moral purpose, catalytic action, sustainability, collaborative relationships, commitment, educational salience, social knowledge, and poverty understanding and advocacy. These outcomes together characterized the emerging program theory that while unique to this program, was consistent with much of the literature addressing successful community collaborations designed to impact and cope with poverty. Schools and other community organizations are encouraged to look at this successful collaboration for the building blocks for collaborative program foundations, but also cautioned that many essential ingredients will emerge from their own, unique culture within their schools and communities.

Introduction

For the past 13 years, a church congregation located in a mid-sized, Midwest city (population = 112,720)(U.S. Census Bureau, 2005) has maintained a grassroots collaboration with an elementary school located in their urban neighborhood. Housed in a building over one hundred years old, the school struggles to provide the necessary resources to students, the majority of whom live in poverty. On any given day, however, a visitor/researcher arriving at the school finds an old building with students, parents, members of the church, and teachers in an atmosphere of cooperation and respect. A member of the congregation put it this way, “We are in a relationship with the school. Our mission is not to save the school but to love and care for the people, improve their lives, and improve the neighborhood.”

The students in the school and their families face many challenges. Two demographic factors proven to affect student achievement are poverty and high mobility (Duncan, 1999). The mobility rate in the school is 22.7%, lower than the district mobility rate (31.6%) and slightly above the state rate (16.8%). Low income poverty rates are 97.9% for the school, significantly above the district rate (62.4%) and the state rate (39%). Student achievement, however is strong, as reflected by the recent designation of making Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) (Interactive Illinois Report Card, 2004). As reported by the principal, families formally request that their children remain at the school even after the family has moved from the school boundaries. Such boundary waiver requests exceed the maximum allowable by school district policy.

The relationship between the school and church congregation has evolved over the years. What began as a relationship-based, letter-writing initiative in second grade

expanded exponentially to include a focus on reading, tutoring, and mentoring, as well as enrichment activities not previously available at the school or in the community. Every student in grades two through grade five has a family from the congregation who sponsors that child. Over the years other programs emerged as members of the congregation saw needs they could meet. Members of the congregation organized and maintained a funded after school arts enrichment program; a children's choir; a summer soccer league; tutoring; classroom assistance; donations of all kinds; grade level field trips; holiday parties and birthday celebrations; neighborhood housing and beautification efforts; school facility beautification; and finally individual and church support of children, families and school staff in crisis. The program emphasizes an intentionally relational partnership between the school and church.

This school-church collaboration has been lauded as successful throughout the community, and has achieved statewide recognition for student academic achievement and volunteer commitment. However, exploration of what ingredients have contributed to this perceived success, and how those ingredients are linked to the overall mission of the program has not clearly been articulated. Therefore, this collaborative effort between an urban elementary school and neighboring church congregation served as an exemplar suitable for instrumental case study research (Stake, 1995).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the key ingredients that contributed to the success of this program, via the interaction and discourse of key players in the program. Specifically, investigators sought to: (1) perform a qualitative study that identified central themes underlying this successful collaboration; (2) effectively integrate the themes into

a coherent program theory that characterized the efforts by stakeholders to impact poverty; and (3) use emerging theory to develop a framework to be adapted by other organizations including, but not restricted to churches, to effectively address issues of poverty within their communities.

Table 1 Research Questions

Research Questions	
(1) How do different stakeholders within and external to the program describe the intended outcomes?	It is particularly troublesome to try to attribute outcomes (causality) to program design. Though behaviors, test scores, and mobility rates may change coincidental to the implementation of a program, it is methodologically challenging to confirm that the program caused these changes. An alternative that holds merit is the development of program theory. Weiss (2000) described program theory as “the set of beliefs that underlie action...It is a set of hypotheses upon which people build their program plans” (p. 55). Patton (1997) similarly termed this the program’s “theory of action” (p. 218), and advocated a “user-focused approach” (p. 219) in which researchers work with the stakeholders in the program to determine their theories of how the program produces the desired outcomes.
(2) How do the different components (activities) link to one another to approach or produce these outcomes?	
(3) How do key stakeholders characterize the effectiveness of the program?	
(4) How are the programs experienced by those involved in their implementation?	

Identifying program theory, while very valuable in understanding why programs work, cannot overcome all of the challenges inherent in the evaluation of social and educational programs (Cook, 1997; Patton, 1997; Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999; Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991; Torres, Piontek, & Preskill, 1996). Hacsí (2000) noted that “some programs work because of idiosyncratic factors...which cannot be easily

replicated or adapted no matter how well we understand them. Political, financial, and other factors will always complicate the spread of any program” (p. 76). The interpretive case study approach provided “an accurate but limited understanding” (Stake, 1995, p. 134), of the relationship between this particular congregation and the children and families from this urban school.

Methods

Participants

Participants in the study included teachers from the second, third and fourth grades, church congregation members (including Sunday School class members and members of the program’s task force), four parents, and the three program leaders – two women volunteers from the church and the school principal. Researchers selected participants who had significant involvement in the program; nearly all church volunteers had multiple years of participation, and each of the parents had more than one child who had participated in the program. While a few of the teachers were new to the school (and the collaborative program), the vast majority had several years experience interacting and collaborating with members of the church.

Participation in the study was completely voluntary and required the informed consent of each individual. All aspects of the study conformed to the rules and guidelines established by the university Committee for Use of Human Subjects in Research, and had the committee’s approval prior to and throughout data collection. Participants were either identified by role or assigned pseudonyms, and the program was assigned a pseudonym (Pals program), as well.

Procedures

Researchers gained entry to the program through the program leaders (women volunteers and school principal), and through those in positions of formal authority within the school district and church. The two principal investigators met with the two women from the church who spearheaded the program, as well as with the school principal to describe the nature and intent of the study. Formal meetings with the directing pastor of the church, as well as the school district superintendent were convened to gain official access to the program.

The school principal served as the liaison for researchers in the school. He assisted in scheduling an informational meeting with teachers prior to scheduled interviews or focus groups. The women leaders served as the liaisons to the church, and alerted researchers to upcoming program activities at the school, introducing participating volunteers and teachers. They also assisted researchers in scheduling focus group meetings with members of the congregation who volunteered in the program, and with the program task force at the church.

Data Sources

Researchers employed multiple strategies to collect qualitative data from program stakeholders, including interviews with key informants (church volunteer leaders, school principal, church volunteer activity coordinator), a series of focus groups (parents, teachers, congregation members), ongoing observations of children during program events, and a comprehensive review of archival documents concerning the establishment and implementation of the collaborative program.

The emergent design of the study allowed questions to follow and flow from participant responses. It also allowed participants to suggest individuals for interviews, upcoming Pal events, or critical documentation, which researchers should review to further understand the program. At the conclusion of interviews and focus groups, researchers requested that participants agree to follow-up member checking to confirm researcher accuracy in the summary and interpretation of interview content.

Data Organization

Consistent with Glaser & Strauss (1967), data collection and data analysis occurred almost simultaneously. Interviews and focus groups were audiotaped (with participants' written permission), then transcribed and summarized by the principal investigators and research assistant. Summaries were forwarded to interview participants and focus group representatives for clarification and confirmation.

What began as naturalistic sampling (Ball, 1990) then moved into theoretical sampling as summaries were analyzed and concepts developed (Ball, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Recurring themes and descriptions were noted and conceptualized early in the data collection process, and subsequent data and themes were compared to these concepts recorded on the Blackboard site dedicated to the research. Finally, data were placed in a matrix denoting the recurring themes that emerged within the context of the four research questions (See Table 2, p. 22). No *a priori* theoretical framework was imposed upon the study in order that the espoused program theory could emerge and would not be constrained by existing theoretical frameworks.

Assumptions and Limitations

The results of this case study deepen our understanding of the components of a successful school – church collaboration. It is important to note that researchers began with the assumption that this was a successful collaboration, and did not seek to either prove or invalidate this success, but rather to learn about the ingredients or components that contribute to this success.

Another assumption integral to the research is that the school – church collaboration is structured as a program. Though it involves volunteers, and has expanded to address many needs inherent in the school and within the community, it is not a social service or governmental intervention, but a mediating influence (Glenn, 2000). Review of the archival documents confirms the development, implementation, and evaluation phases of the collaboration, and therefore, researchers have described this collaboration as a “program.”

While the findings from this case study deepen our understanding of a successful school – church collaboration, the findings are not intended to be generalized to other schools, programs, or communities, any of which exhibit varied approaches to outreach programming. However, the findings may be used to better understand the nature of effective collaboration, and the components integral to its success.

Results

The presentation of the interview, focus group, and observation data was organized within the context of the four research questions. Archival data from program documents supported, and in some cases further clarified the themes that emerged. Summaries of the findings in response to each research question are listed on the

subsequent pages, with a results matrix following that depicts the themes and outcomes (See Table 2 p. 22).

(1) How do stakeholders describe intended outcomes?

When asked an open-ended question to describe the intended outcomes for the relationship between the school and church, participant responses came from different perspectives but the common thread of all responses was that the relationship between students and volunteers was paramount. The mission of the church is to express faith in the neighborhood. The mission of the school is to prepare young people for the future. Many might see a contradiction between church and school, but the leaders of this collaboration have focused solely on their deep passion for the welfare of the children. The church has a long standing reputation in the community for outreach. In collaboration with the church, the school has developed a statewide reputation for high academic achievement as a Spotlight School (Billman, 2000).

Members of the congregation saw the outcomes from the perspective of their faith. A couple who organize a soccer team in the summer and choir in the winter months spoke for all when they said their purpose was to meet Jesus in the neighborhood. Benefits to students were seen by all as the enrichment activities and experiences afforded the children through one-on-one relationships with adults from the congregation. Benefits to families included the development of a strong relationship with the school.

The principal described the purposes of the program as working together with members of the congregation to meet the needs of the students. He described the needs of the students in his school on several levels: academic, physical, emotional, and social. He said, “[the church] has planted a lot of seeds.” Many programs and activities have grown

out of an initial adult Sunday School class response to a call to work in the neighborhood where the church is located. Undoubtedly in his mind, the students have greatly benefited from the relationship. In the 13 years since the program has been in effect, mobility rates have declined dramatically and student achievement scores are high despite the high rate of poverty.

All outcomes mentioned for students had a very strong relational component. Academic performance was considered important, but no more important than enrichment kinds of experiences, such as the after school arts program, soccer, and choir, provided through the church. Providing love and support to the children was seen as a very critical intended outcome. Teachers believed that relationships between children and their Pals had the effect of helping children to improve their behaviors. The volunteer leaders believed that the self-esteem of children was enhanced through one on one relationships with church volunteers. The teachers believed these relationships often provided motivation to students. Additionally, the commitment of the volunteers offered stability to children whose lives may lack continuity.

Intended outcomes for the church related to the opportunities afforded by the relationships with the children to express their spirituality in the neighborhood. All respondents from the church (Sunday School, Task Force and two volunteer leaders) indicated that their relationships strengthened their faith through service to the children and their families. The volunteer leaders characterized the intended outcomes as expressing respect, caring and love to the children. From the perspective of the two volunteers, one of the greatest outcomes was the opportunity for the congregation to engage in relationships with the children.

One of the volunteer leaders related the program enabled the congregation to play an advocacy role for the students, an entirely new role to most members of the congregation. From her perspective, congregants advocate for children and their families of poverty, for a struggling school system, and for the faculty and staff who need support. She concluded by saying that the relationships between children and adults “start the whole domino effect of the other effects.” Other members of the congregation also talked about ways in which newfound understandings of the circumstances faced by many children living in poverty has put them in a new role of advocacy for the children. As part of this journey, one volunteer stated that in his mind, the congregation came to want to provide the same advantages for students in this school as they provide(d) for their own children.

The leaders of the soccer and choir programs believed that the Pals Program has taught members of congregation about people living in poverty. Many myths about the poor have been dispelled as a result of getting to know the children and their families. For instance, people living in poverty are often thought to be unchurched, but they have learned that many of the children they work with have their own church.

Families experienced a ripple effect as their children entered into relationships with members of the church. The principal stated that he believed connections between the school and families have strengthened as a result of relationships between members of the congregation and the children. The school was described by the Pals Task Force as a sanctuary for children and their parents. A key volunteer who organizes soccer and the choir said he appreciates the trust that parents demonstrate when they share their children with the volunteers. The parents also indicated a strong connection with the school made

possible by the Pal Program. One parent noted that she feels the stigma that was once part of living in the neighborhood has been lessened because of the feeling of optimism and hope in the school.

Other sources of data collected (observations and artifacts) support that positive loving relationships between children and the church members was the primary driving force behind all endeavors between the church and the school. The emerging themes and outcomes, which will be discussed later, also support the position that through positive relationships between children and volunteers, many positive benefits have been realized including academic performance, lowered mobility, and active parent involvement.

(2) How do the different components (activities) link to one another to approach or produce these outcomes?

Understanding the relationships between the different components required researchers to outline all the different kinds of “programs or activities” that have emerged over the years between the church and school, review the many artifacts provided, and then go back to key informants (principal, the couple who organize the soccer and choir, and two volunteer leaders) to understand how the Pals program worked.

The original partnership between the church and school began in 1994, when a Sunday School class decided to reach out into the immediate neighborhood surrounding the church. The original project paired a family from the congregation with a second grader student to form a pen pal relationship. The partnership expanded to include the assignment of a volunteer mentor from the congregation for every student in grades two through five. Mentoring activities vary by grade level but each level celebrates birthdays and other interactions throughout the year. Each student is given a sweatshirt with the Pals logo to build pride in their school and the Pals Program.

The purpose of the collaboration has evolved over the years yet still “endeavors to provide an avenue for intentional communications between members of the congregation and students from our neighborhood school. The goal is to provide students and families in the church an opportunity to discover the ‘world’ of other families. The relationship which develops between [volunteers and students] has the potential to enhance educational opportunities and to enable a growing understanding between partners” (brochure about the Pal Program).

In second grade each child receives a teddy bear with a backpack which carries a minimum of four pen pal letter exchanges during the school year. Volunteers commit to a minimum of three personal meetings during the school year with the student. The church organizes two Saturday gatherings at school per year and a final trip to a local park.

In third grade, each child is paired with a family from the congregation and receives a minimum of one monthly visit during the school day. Students also receive books and a hand puppet which they keep throughout the year. Fourth grade children are paired with church families who visit during the school day a minimum of once a month. Students and volunteers go to the local community college at the end of the school year followed by a stop for ice cream.

Fifth grade students are also paired with church families who visit during the school day a minimum of once a month. The focus at fifth grade is on math. Each student receives a magnetic board to improve math proficiency. During the school year, three career days are organized where local people talk to 5th graders about their career. The end of the year outing will be a trip to the state capital.

Church volunteers have also tutored at the school for many years. They work under the direction and coordination of the reading coach and the volunteer coordinator employed by the district. Tutors work with students in grades K-5 and also help with the after-school program. Tutors serve as test proctors with homeroom teachers during state testing.

Commitment to the students and the school expanded over the years to include tutoring, a soccer program in a local park (where prostitution and gang activities thrive, but not on soccer nights), a choir, an after school arts program, donations to purchase school supplies and school uniforms, and projects to improve the conditions of the 100+ year old building. Members of the congregation also support a scholarship program that will provide \$1000 for any graduate of the elementary school who seeks postsecondary educational experiences. In addition to the formalized mentoring activities described below, many Pals from the congregation complete the criminal background checks and receive parental permission to take students on outings outside of the regular school day.

Central to all responses to this research question was the importance of the highly organized collaboration and coordination roles played by all, but particularly the principal and two volunteer leaders. The principal stated that he saw his role primarily as a coordinator and that he worked very hard on maintaining effective communications between the church and school. "Basically I feel that I am the point person on the relationship. All the programs, the field trips, whatever we do, starts usually with the church member or members contacting me." As point person, the principal maintains active communications with the volunteer leaders, monthly meetings with the Task Force, and a minimum of two worship services a year to help sign up volunteers. At the

school site, the principal also worked diligently to communicate with the teachers and staff about volunteer activities. Maintaining the integrity of learning at the school while also remaining open to many volunteers who come in and out of the building regularly was a high priority to the principal. Teachers were involved with members of the congregation from the very beginning to devise procedures that allow volunteers to visit with children without compromising learning. All observations and artifacts supported the principal's statements about them.

The teachers indicated that all programs and activities are firmly grounded in child development which they attribute to the influence of the two volunteer leaders. Observations and artifacts support this contention. Party activities, after school activities, supporting materials provided the volunteers, are all designed with the developmental needs of children of any socioeconomic group in mind.

The volunteer leaders stated they anticipated a need for a support system for the church volunteers. They agreed that it is the human resources and the sustained energy that are critical to success rather than financial resources. The record-keeping requirement is significant, and the program would benefit from a paid clerical staff person. A very active volunteer stated that one of the biggest challenges is maintaining the energy necessary to coordinate so many volunteers. The frustration expressed by this volunteer was focused upon difficulties when other volunteers do not have the same level of commitment.

Linkage of program activities with organizations outside the school district and church is perhaps best illustrated through the soccer and choir programs. After being a Pal for several years, a retired couple realized that soccer would be a good activity for the

children of the school. The husband contacted one of the two volunteer leaders, the principal, and the city park district. Eventually, working with others, this couple orchestrated an arrangement for the park district to maintain the park for soccer (previously the park had been a bare city block covered only by grass), provide an official and shin guards. The congregation and volunteer provide soccer uniforms and balls. The wife manages all uniforms which involves stuffing a bag for each player and weekly laundry. The congregation provides each player with team shirts, shoes, socks, and snacks. The park district police cruise around the park during games. According to the wife, they usually have 100 to 125 children for soccer. At the time of the interview, the soccer program was starting its 5th year. The husband describes a typical evening this way, “(during the games) the park is sort of a family place because some of the parents come and watch their kids. The Pals of the players come. The church members are there because that is where all the coaches come from and they bring snacks. So that is what happens for basically June and July at the park.”

After the success of the soccer program, this same couple realized the children needed activities during the winter months, so they initiated the choir. This collaboration also involves the park district, principal, and the director of Fine Arts in the local school district as the board of directors for the choir. Thirty nine children were involved in the choir when we interviewed this couple. There is a waiting list of children wanting to join the choir. The choir performs for local nursing homes, other schools, and at community events. The couple takes care of permission slips, washing choir robes, and all the myriad details of getting a group of children to a performance.

This couple visits every family prior to enrolling a child in choir or soccer to explain the program, the rules and expectations. “We go to every family so they know who these people are and we explain procedures because they are putting their second grader on a van with a bunch of people they don’t know and they go away someplace, where they don’t know, and they are supposed to bring them back at a certain time. There is a lot of trust there.” Families have been very supportive. Every soccer and choir practice begins with a prayer. This is explained to the parents when the couple visits. No parent has objected.

Data from the focus group with parents revealed they were aware of the various components of the collaboration. Their characterization of the various aspects of the collaboration and the effects upon their children were quite positive. Parents did not, however, have first-hand understanding though of *how* the components of the collaboration were linked to one another.

(3) How do key stakeholders characterize the effectiveness of the program?

All respondents in the study were overwhelmingly positive about the effectiveness of the program. Mutual respect for children, teachers, church volunteers, parents, and the principal was a common, indeed overwhelming thread of responses to this question. The members of the congregation expressed their opinions in religious terms (a blessing to church members and their families). Members of the congregation feel they are making a difference in the lives of their students. They were also expressed gratitude for the dedication and commitment of the two church leaders who have nurtured the relationship from the beginning and continue to be active.

Another important element of respect expressed by members of the church was new understandings about people living in poverty. Church members stated an appreciation for the cross-cultural relationships developed with the students and their families through their involvement with the school. “You learn to appreciate the struggles they go through. There is only one word for it and that is ‘survival.’... You can hear about it, but until you experience it you don’t understand how limiting these obstacles really are. It just reinforces your desire to do this kind of ministry. Whatever you can do to give them a level playing field to give them a chance to be successful.”

The women volunteer leaders expressed concern about the future of the program because leadership will change as the principal retires at the end of this school year. The district also faces many challenges that will affect this particular school. The building is over 100 years old and plans are under discussion to build a new school which will involve new boundaries. The women volunteers agreed that human resources and sustained energy are critical to the continued success of the project. At the same time they expressed these concerns for the future, one of the women said that the success has come from the children and “people feel hope with children.” Her comment reflects the deep shared passion for the welfare of the children in this school.

Parents were positive about the effects of the Pal Program on students. They put it this way, “We learn from one another, we respect one another.” From the parental perspective, children at this school feel loved. The academic and behavioral help students receive from the adult volunteers has been very beneficial according to the parents. One parent described the program as “like the Boys and Girls Club, but more personal.” One of the most critical aspects of the school is that their children are taught and receive

respect. They credited the principal for the atmosphere of respect. Parents expressed hope that the school not lose the program.

Members of the church stated that the success of this particular outreach program has spread to other ministries in the congregation. They see this as a very positive benefit to the program.

At the beginning of the 2006-07 school year, the school was designated as an Illinois Spotlight School, a high honor for a school with a 97.5% poverty level. Spotlight Schools are recognized by Northern Illinois University as working in an environment of high-poverty, high-performing schools are beating the “achievement gap.” Criteria for this award include: (1) Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by No Child Left Behind, (2) a minimum of 50% low income students in current and previous two years, (3) a minimum of 60% of students met or exceeded state standards in the current year, and (4) a minimum of 50% of students met or exceeded state standards in the previous two years (Billman, 2005).

(4) How are the programs experienced?

“We are joyfully burdened” (member of the congregation).

When asked to describe how they experienced the program, every group or individual we interviewed including the parents, members of the congregation, volunteer leaders, teachers, and the principal included a spiritual benefit to the Pals Program. Members of the Sunday School class that originated the program 13 years ago said they willingly accept the ambivalence of joy and pain in entering into relationships with children whose lives characterized by poverty are too often chaotic and lived in a “survival mode.” At the same time, they mentioned disappointment that other churches

have not joined in their ministry to work with children in high poverty schools. The volunteer leaders expressed a need to reenergize - not so much from the work with the children as with the strains of coordinating so many volunteers.

The parents appreciated that members of the congregation were spiritual people who are open to all faiths. They said volunteers model healthy respect rather than imposing their religious beliefs upon others. From the parent perspective, they believed that the program helped dispel the stigma formerly associated with the neighborhood.

The teachers said the volunteers model positive behavior and often share insights about children that help teachers work more effectively with students. They said they feel personally and professionally supported through prayer support offered anonymously for each teacher by a member of the congregation. The teachers believe the volunteers contribute to the positive culture and atmosphere of the school.

Finally, the principal echoed the feelings of others we interviewed. "I think that it has deepened my faith and I found that I kind of look forward to speaking to the church members from the heart about how faith works in our lives." The opportunity to observe relationships between members of the congregation and students is moving to him. "Some are still maintaining contact with buddies after they are out of high school, incarcerated, and they are still trying to help them get on with their lives." Church volunteers concurred, relating that "it has been a gift! The relationship with us. We get a lot more out of it than anyone else. I think people who are not involved in things like that are really missing out. Each one of these children is a gift. I would not trade them for anything."

Themes and Outcomes

Data analysis revealed many interrelated themes. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, researchers sought to first conceptualize themes, then to explore the relationship of the themes to one another in an effort to illustrate the program theory for this unique collaboration. The themes as they were conceptualized early in the data collection appear in Table 2.

Table 2 Results Matrix and Emerging Themes

Key Informant Group	Question 1: Intended Outcomes	Question 2: Components Linkage	Question 3: Effectiveness	Question 4: Informant Experience
Program Leaders	Educational salience Respect Advocacy Spirituality Relationships	Collaborative leadership Sustainability	Renewed community Respect Sustainability	Spirituality Moral purpose
Church Volunteers	Spirituality Relationships Poverty resources Understanding/ advocacy	Respect Spirituality Commitment Catalytic action	Spirituality Respect Renewed community Understanding/ advocacy	Spirituality Understanding/ advocacy
Parents	Educational salience Renewed community Relationships	Commitment Relationships	Respect Sustainability Commitment	Spirituality Respect Renewed community
Teachers	Social knowledge Commitment Relationships	Collaborative leadership Social knowledge	Respect Sustainability	Spirituality Educational salience

Discussion

Data generated in response to the four research questions revealed two central themes, and three program level outcomes. Respect and spirituality represent the central, core themes of the study because every subsequent program outcome was based in some part on these two qualities. Respect, as it was illustrated in this collaborative program, goes beyond simple acknowledgement to characterize the sustained interaction between

and among program participants. Best described as affirming, the theme of respect is consistent with Isaacs' (1999) characterization:

At its core, the act of respect invites us to see others as legitimate. Respect means honoring boundaries to the point of protecting them. If you respect someone, you do not withhold yourself or distance yourself from them. Treating people around us with extraordinary respect means seeing them for the potential that they carry within them. (p. 116).

Volunteer leaders expressed and modeled respect toward the children, and maintained mutual respect with the families and with the principal and teaching staff. Parents confirmed that the volunteers and parents respected one another and learned from each other. Observations at the school confirmed such an atmosphere. Everyone in the school is treated with respect. Parents are greeted immediately when they walk into the office, even if the secretary is juggling many details. Even students sitting in the office waiting for resolution of their discipline issues are respectfully told what they need to do. Students typically comply, and even though they may need a reminder just a few minutes later, that direction is given in the same manner.

Spirituality was the second central theme touching all program participants. Volunteer leaders and congregation members characterized their involvement with the school as a ministry, and as expressing their faith within the neighborhood. The principal noted that his involvement in this collaborative program has deepened his faith, and a task force member characterized her involvement as a "spiritual calling." When describing the success of the program, the volunteer leaders acknowledged a strong component that was "intangible," which they attributed to faith. This breadth and depth reflects a broad perspective of spirituality, in which individuals long to be connected with something larger than life (Palmer, 2000). Within the program spirituality "included

expressions based on religious practice, creativity, intuition, wisdom, beliefs, appreciation for others, and compassion” (Lyman, Ashby, & Tripses, 2005, p. 136).

Program parents, too, recognized that the church volunteers were “spiritual people.” While they experienced the faith of the volunteers, they recognized also a sense of respect because that faith was not imposed upon them. Moore (1992) notes that spirituality is not always specifically religious, but rather includes creativity as well as care and compassion for self and others. This definition seems remarkably consistent with the spirituality described and observed within the program.

From the two central core themes emerged three program level outcomes: collaborative leadership, renewed community, and poverty resources. Through the juxtaposition of the program level and their associated themes, the program theory began to take form.

Program Theory

The graphic depiction of the program theory (Figure 1) provides a visual representation of the collaboration. While aspects of this program are supported by the literature, the specific configuration and experience of the program by key informants appears to be unique. Respect and spirituality are at the core; program participants agree that without these qualities, the program would not be successful. Emerging from the core themes are the program outcomes: collaborative leadership, renewed community, and poverty resources. These outcomes are not unusual for a school-church or school-community collaboration, however, it is the grounding of these outcomes in spirituality and respect that make this collaboration unique.

Imagine that instead of a static diagram, that the visual depiction of the theory included movement. The core, respect and spirituality, remain fixed, while the inner circle (containing the program outcomes) and outer circle (containing the secondary outcomes) can rotate and assume new positions. In this way, one is able to see that while collaborative leadership is characterized by the secondary outcomes of moral purpose, catalytic action, and sustainability, it is not limited to those outcomes. A clockwise turn of 90 degrees also invests commitment and relationships as outcomes of collaborative leadership, and represents the interrelationship and the fluidity of the themes that make up this theory.

Discussion of collaborative leadership, renewed community, and poverty resources, and their associated secondary outcomes will correspond to the fixed depiction of the themes as they appear in print, but the reader is encouraged to see this as a fluid representation.

Collaborative leadership revealed moral purpose, catalytic action, and sustainability. *Moral purpose* was exemplified by school and volunteer leaders in the study as not only recognizing right from wrong, but also serving the common good (Fullan, 2003), developing a common sense of purpose (Fullan, 2003; Furman, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1992), and developing leadership potential in others (Fullan, 2003; Lambert et al., 1995).

Figure 1 Program Theory as Central Themes and Outcomes



The moral purpose of teachers, volunteers, volunteer leaders and the principal were clearly demonstrated (although not stated in those terms) through all means of data gathering. Particularly evident was the desire to serve the common good, meaning the welfare of students. For members of the congregation, understandings of social

injustices inflicted upon children they came to know and care about created new and often disturbing realities about right and wrong. The principal has created means by which developing the leadership potential of others is part of the culture. During observations at the school, the principal was in and out of activities, always encouraging and reminding others of the purposes of the school. Teachers and other personnel in the school clearly understood their roles in ways that contributed to the well being of all.

What we have termed “catalytic action,” represented efforts to move beyond the bureaucracy and its inherent boundaries to effect action and challenge the status quo when needed (Fullan, 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Sergiovanni, 1992). Leaders who have the capacity to see beyond the prescriptions of constraints in the environment stemming from bureaucratic policies, scarce resources, oppression, and societal issues reflected in the lives of students to focus clearly on their defined moral purpose can effect dramatic change through catalytic action (Lyman, Ashby, & Tripses, 2005; Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005). The school principal, as well as the volunteer leaders, represent such change agents who know how to work with others to get the job done and

have the capacity to work through complex issues with others in ways that energize rather than deplete the commitment of organizational members.

Sustainability referred to program founders' attention to leadership succession and continued service as community application of their faith. Leaders of the collaboration, particularly the volunteer leaders expressed concern about sustainability of the program. To some degree their concerns stemmed from maintaining energy to coordinate so many volunteers to fill the needs of children of poverty. But other changes for the school are in the future. The principal will retire at the end of the 2006-07 school year. Recently, one of the volunteer leaders announced that she and her husband are leaving the area. The school and program, then will have new leadership at the beginning of the 2007-08 school year. The 100+ year old building will be in use for the foreseeable future as the school board and community determine how to best remedy situations created by financial difficulties and very old buildings in the district. So for the time, the old school will remain open.

Renewed community applied to both the school community or culture, and the urban community in which it is located. The social and geographic environment of this school/church community is permeated by poverty. Students and their families are predominantly poor and minority (African American and Hispanic). There is little commerce or business evident in the surrounding neighborhood. Typical of the jobless ghettos characteristic of poor urban neighborhoods (Wilson, 1996), the neighborhood surrounding the school has many formerly grand homes split into apartments.

The socioeconomic status (SES) of families, as well as the socioeconomic landscape of the neighborhood have been revisited, and shown to impact academic

achievement (Sirin, 2005). The SES of parents reflects the amount and nature of both the resources at home that can be applied toward education, and the “social capital” that the students and families can draw upon. The poverty rate within the school district in the current study reflects these findings. Parents have fewer resources and limited social capital to utilize within the school environment.

However, the social environment has changed over the 13 years of the collaboration as members of the congregation have advocated for the families of children attending the school. Two Habitat for Humanity homes have been built for families largely through the efforts of the congregation. As a direct result of No Child Left Behind and the school’s academic success and acknowledgement through the state, former perceptions by some in the community that the children of the school could not perform have been disproved.

Relationships depicted the importance of connection between school personnel, families, and congregation members, as well as the process to develop them. This sense of connection and program process is essential to move beyond bureaucratic structures to a more fluid and inclusive approach (Bolman & Deal, 2001; Wheatley, 1999). Producing such relationships is not without challenge. The families within the study have fewer resources and less social capital to apply toward the school, a situation which has been shown to adversely impact families’ relationships with school staff (Sirin, 2005).

However, the relationships are truly the vehicle that makes community renewal possible. Church volunteers saw the power in the relationships and how it changed their views of those living in poverty. Parents commended the relationships within the Pals

program and involvement of the church in the school. One parent said “I want my kids to do more than I did as a child.”

Commitment was made to the school and to the neighborhood on the part of the families, coinciding with a commitment to, or renewal of faith among the congregation members and program and school leaders. This differential experience of commitment and renewal illustrates the spirit that calls individuals to a common purpose (Fullan, 2003; Bolman & Deal, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1992). Teachers noted that the day-in, day-out commitment of the volunteers offers both stability and continuity for the students. Church volunteers identify their commitment to the program as a priority. Though they maintain busy lives, one volunteer noted “I make time.” Parents, likewise, described in detail the different components of the collaboration, and reported their gratitude that the programs were consistent – even stepwise – year after year.

Poverty resources yielded an understanding of the importance of education and of the school, termed educational salience, as well as social knowledge, understanding of, and advocacy for those in poverty. Research on community-based programs in schools, confirmed the contributions of such programs (McLaughlin, 2001). Children in poverty, especially children of color, involved in community-based organizations gained in both academic and life skills that continued into adulthood. McLaughlin (2001) suggested that schools could do more to strengthen such collaborations, moving beyond merely “shared space.”

The collaboration in this study goes far beyond shared space to provide poverty resources. Every child in grades two through five has a one-to-one relationship with a volunteer Pal. Payne and Krabill (2002) suggested that both individuals and organizations

bring resources, connections, and hidden rules (of class) together in any collaboration. How these mesh will determine how successful that experience will be. Over the years, members of the church have identified needs of the high poverty children and have worked diligently to provide programs and experiences to mediate the effects of poverty in such a way that they do mesh.

One outcome, *social knowledge* came from the enrichment activities offered through the expanded programming (art, soccer, choir, field trips). Teachers attributed students' increased motivation to their participation in the program, and appreciated that activities were age appropriate and clearly grounded in child development principles. These activities provided a space for parents to interact with the school, the school staff, and with one another in a way that facilitated, rather than hindered parental involvement. The more traditional parental involvement initiatives in schools (e.g. PTA) have not always facilitated minority parents' voice and power as effectively (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Fine, 1993).

Educational salience referred to viewing education, or the school itself in high regard as a part of the community. Payne & Krabill (2002) suggested that education, when viewed by families in poverty is "valued and revered as abstract, but not as reality" (p. 62). Efforts to bring parents to the school through the Pals program have helped to attack that premise. The school principal described strengthened relationships between families and the school as a result of the program. Parents similarly commented that they believed school can make a difference for their children. Teachers felt the program contributed to a more positive school culture, increasing the salience of education for all.

Finally, *understanding and advocacy* reflected the new understanding on the part of all participants, and new advocacy roles assumed by church members. Families participating in the program experienced aspects of the “social toolkit,” (Duncan, 1999) learning skills and habits, and understanding the symbols characteristic of entry into a middle class-designed world (Duncan, 1999; Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi Smith, 2001). Congregation members learned the cyclical nature of generational poverty, and replaced blame with understanding (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi Smith, 2001; Payne & Ehlig, 1999; Payne & Krabill, 2002). The advocacy role was a new role for many congregation members, and they advocated not only for the students, but for their families, for the struggling school system, and for the faculty and staff within the school.

The emerging program theory emphasized the very necessary and effective outcomes, including collaborative leadership, renewed community, and poverty resources. In addition were the more specific secondary, yet interrelated outcomes that characterized these three. However, the true core of this program theory—the central themes—are the qualities of respect and spirituality. The central themes, together with the program level and secondary outcomes, provide a framework for an effective collaboration, as it is described in the literature.

Components of Collaboration

This program illustrated many of the vital ingredients that contribute to an effective collaboration. In their review of research on collaboration, Mattessich and Monsey (1992) define collaboration as a “mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals...[including] a definition of mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed

structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success and sharing of resources and rewards” (p. 7). They identified 19 factors of collaboration grouped into six categories: environment, membership, process/structure, purpose, and resources. Effective collaborations attend to all factors as they relate to mutually desired outcomes.

The membership of this collaboration has many skills that are used to the benefit of the children of the school. Teachers, obviously, have professional skills that they have used in nontraditional ways to plan with volunteers and support volunteers coming into the building frequently to work or visit with children. Volunteers have employed their varied skills to benefit the children. As expressed by the volunteers, their faith is the driving force behind their work in the school. The school district, park district, community, vocal group, and area nursing homes have expanded “business as usual” to accommodate and work with the volunteers and principal to provide the many experiences for the children. The attitudes of trust exhibited by parents contributed to the success of the collaboration.

The processes and structure of the program has evolved over time. The principal manages the complexities of schedules. The volunteer coordinators manage and coordinate a volunteer pool of over 250 people. The three primary leaders manage flexibility and efficacy through continuous evaluation and refinement of the program. Over and over we heard, “we used to do it this way, but we learned to do it better.” Teachers, volunteers and the principal have been continuously involved in appraisal based upon what works best for the needs of students.

Communication is continuous and is in all ways characterized by respect. When we were gathering data, we contacted the principal to make arrangements to conduct focus groups with the teachers. We intended to hold the groups in the teachers lounge during the time when some teachers would typically eat lunch there. The principal stressed the commitment of the teachers to the research project, but said he wanted to check with them first to make sure no one would be inconvenienced by our use of the teachers' lounge. He e-mailed back a day later to say all was fine. The principal and volunteer leaders are conscientious about getting all events on calendars that are distributed to all involved. Procedures for Pal visits are clearly communicated to Pals at the beginning of the year orientation. Relationships and trust are central to all communications.

The shared purpose of the collaboration is the well being of the students. For members of the congregation, their faith is the foundation for the purpose of the program. The purpose as defined by the principal is constructed more in professional than in spiritual or religious terms. The shared vision for the program has evolved over time. The principal articulated goals in more concrete attainable ways (increased academic achievement, parent involvement, student behavior) than the volunteer leaders.

The primary resources are human resources in the form of many people working together for the benefit of the students. Volunteers in the form of a Pal for each student, enrichment experiences, and coordinators to pull this together make a difference in the school. The teachers' willingness to participate in planning, program activities and flexibility that allows volunteers to visit with their Pals during the school day is essential for the success of the program. The principal uses Title I resources (personnel, advisory

board) in conjunction with the program. Funding is provided through generous donations by members of the congregation (each Pal pays \$25 to participate in the program).

American public schools face increasing pressure for collaboration with outside organizations. Collaboration is presented as a means to address many of the perceived or real ills of public education (Johnson, 1998). While this may have benefits, factors that may impede effective collaboration within schools and between other organizations must also be considered. Four structural features of school organization – the stimulus-overload work environment, teacher autonomy norm, control-orientation structures, and level of public vulnerability of schools – are factors that should be considered when planning collaborations (Johnson, 1998). Working together, teachers, parents, volunteers and the principal have committed to find ways to create a collaborative environment where the gains exceed the costs of collaboration and shared influence or leadership is coupled with shared accountability. Based upon shared understandings of the needs of the students, teachers have expanded their professional autonomy to include others who can also help the children (Pounder, 1998, pp. 173-74).

Based upon our research, the collaboration has been very successful from multiple vantage points. Student achievement, school climate, congregational support and commitment, teacher engagement are all focused on the well being of students. However, because relational themes of respect and spirituality depend heavily upon the individuals involved, the future of the relationship between the school and the congregation is uncertain. Fullan (2005) identifies eight elements of sustainability (public service with a moral purpose, commitment to changing context at all levels, lateral capacity building through networks, intelligent accountability and vertical relationships, deep learning, dual

commitment to short-term and long-term results, cyclical energizing, and finally leadership. We believe all eight elements of sustainability were evident in the program.

The issue here relates to the future. With two of the three key leaders moving on, how will the school and congregation maintain a program that has deep meaning for all stakeholders? Fullan (2005) points to individual leadership based on clear moral purpose and system transformation. District level leadership will be critical. Again, Fullan provides a list of rather complex lessons learned about district work that include some overlap with the building sustainability elements stated previously. The ten lessons are: leading with a compelling, driving conceptualization; collective moral purpose; Collins' (2001) idea of getting the right people on the bus; capacity building; lateral capacity building; ongoing learning; productive conflict; a demanding culture; external partners; and finally growing financial investments. While district wide administrators could no doubt benefit from Fullan's ten lessons, the primary lesson we propose to the district is to look carefully at what has worked well in this building serving children whose needs are many. Carefully select the new leader, provide ample support and encouragement coupled with high expectations, and allow time for new relationships characterized by respect and spirituality to grow.

Fullan's (2005) ninth lesson deals with external partners. The church is such a partner for this district. Our study clearly reveals that members of the congregation feel strongly in their advocacy roles for their Pals. Through an adaptive process (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002), members of the congregation came to understand poverty very differently. Stereotypes vanished as volunteers got to know their Pals and came to care deeply about the conditions of life for the children. Members of the congregation will likely be invited

to participate in planning and implementation for the future. The congregation is advised to understand deeper meanings of plans for the future based upon their 13 year relationship with the school.

Summary

America needs a new and balanced vision for how poverty might be overcome. Instead of just rehashing old ideas, we must seek a comprehensive plan for change, involving every sector of society - not just the government, not just the 'market' not just churches and charities, as the various competing ideological options often suggest. Rather, we should focus on the stories on the ground from the most successful and inspiring projects around the country that are truly making a difference, and listen to new approaches they suggest." (Wallis, 2005, p. 226)

We set out to understand what we believed to be a successful collaboration between a high poverty school and the congregation of a church. All evidence we gathered supports our original assumption that the collaboration was positive. What we did not anticipate, but came to appreciate, was the benefit of the collaboration to all stakeholders—students, parents, teachers, volunteers from the congregation, and program leaders. Based upon shared values of working together to improve the well being of the students, as well as extraordinary leadership coupled with exquisite attention to detail, this collaboration has resulted in performance beyond all expectations.

The central themes of respect and spirituality, which are more difficult to pinpoint than more technical descriptions of an endeavor such as the one in this study, are absolutely essential. Without the trust developed over the years between the school, church members, and families, this collaboration would not be out of the ordinary, and would be indistinguishable from so many other programs imposed upon poor children

and families. The collaboration in this study instead was a relationship that emanated from profound respect for all concerned and allowed the spirituality of all to flourish.

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